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XIII.—*The Bayadère; or, Dancing Girls of Southern India.*

By JOHN SHORTT, M.D., F.L.S., M.R.C.P.L., etc., Surgeon-General Superintendent of Vaccination, Madras Presidency.

HINDU girls of every known caste are dedicated to some of the temples, and brought up to the profession of dancing. They do not marry; but are permitted to prostitute their persons to any individual of an equal or superior caste to themselves, or to live in professional concubinage; such practice in no way degrades them from the right to caste privileges, provided they do not form intimacies, or cohabit, with outcasts. There are two kinds of prostitutes who practise the trade, and they are recognised by the vernacular designations of—1. Thassee; or, dancing-girl attached to a Pagoda. 2. Vashee; or prostitute; any bad woman.

The latter, as a rule, comprise women who have left their husbands and gone astray, subsequent to marriage; or are young widows. They have no connexion with any Hindu temples, nor do they dance or sing; so that they choose their habitations in large populous towns, to enable them to practise the trade successfully, congregating in brothels, where, from two to six, or more, may be met with, living together in the vicinity of small Hindu temples, but more frequently inhabiting houses next to toddy or arrack shops; in fact, in some places an arrack or toddy shop is seldom seen without a brothel connected with it, thus proving or connecting drunkenness with prostitution. In our present paper, we purpose confining our remarks to the tribe termed "Thassee", a body of dancing girls, who are either the daughters of such, among whom, like other Hindu castes, the profession descends by hereditary succession; or should these women have no children, which is more frequently the case, they adopt girls of a tender age. All girls intended for the profession of dancing are connected with some Hindu temple, to which they dedicate their



persons; and, in confirmation of the same, a nominal marriage ceremony is carried out for the marriage of the girl to the presiding deity of the temple. Sometimes Hindus of the highest and best castes make a vow in sickness or other affliction, or when surrounded by troubles and trials, to give one of their daughters to some particular temple to which the vow is made, to be brought up as a dancing girl; the vow so made is scrupulously kept and religiously carried out at the proper time. In the selection of girls for adoption in this profession, good-looking, well-made ones are chosen, and they are taught to dance at the early age of five. Older girls, when they adopt the profession, are also taught to dance. The lessons in dancing are given daily, two hours before daylight in the morning, one of which is devoted to singing and the other to dancing. In the evening, after 4 P.M., the same number of hours are devoted, so that each girl has to practise for four hours daily; and in about three years she is supposed to have mastered the arts of singing and dancing.

There are generally six chief kinds of dancing:—

- |                              |                                 |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Dancing or Audoogirathoo. | 4. Dancing or Moodieydoorathoo. |
| 2. „ Ananeeum.               | 5. „ Hereacoothoo.              |
| 3. „ Kenchenee nateum.       | 6. „ Colu autem.                |

At the same time the art of dancing or Abinayaum is said to be exhibited in six different ways during these performances.

1. By the movements of the eyes.
2. „ „ and action of the features.
3. „ „ and attitude of the breasts and chests.
4. „ „ and position of the hands.
5. „ „ and action of the feet.
6. By tumbling, performing somersaults, etc.

By these girls commencing their studies at the early age of five, they are able to make their appearance at about seven or eight years of age, very rarely earlier than that, and they continue practising dancing till they attain thirty or forty years of age, if not previously rendered unfit by disease or premature old age. When these girls are attached to pagodas, they receive certain sums as wages, the amount of which is dependent on the worth, sanctity, and popularity of the particular temple which they have joined. The money salary they receive is

nominal—seldom exceeding a few annas, and sometimes a rupee or two a month. The chief object in being paid this sum as a salary is to indicate that they are servants of the temple; in addition to this one or more of them receive a meal a-day, consisting merely of a mass of boiled rice rolled into a ball. They are required to dance six times a-day, at the temple, before the deity, while the priests are officiating, but this duty is performed by turns. Dancing girls attached to pagodas are generally wealthy, and when they appear before the public are well covered with the usual gold ornaments—if poor, tinsel is used, or golden ones are borrowed from others. Their toilettes are costly and tawdry, whilst their heads, ears, nose, neck, arms, wrists, fingers, ankles, and toes are over-decked with jewels, and their hair frequently with flowers. The hair is divided in front along the centre, combed back and plaited into a single plait, resting loose on the back like a tail, averaging from two to two and a-half feet in length, of course ornamented with jewels and flowers. Their dancing dress comprises usually the short jacket or *choolee*, a pair of string drawers tied at the waist, termed *pyjamas*—both these are generally of silk, and a white or coloured muslin wrapper or *saree*:—one end of the saree is wound around the waist, and two, three, or more feet, according to the length, is gathered and inserted into the portion encircling the waist, and permitting of a folding fringe or gathering of the cloth in front, and the other end taken after the usual native fashion over the left shoulder, and descends towards the waist, when the end, or *moonthane*, is opened out and allowed to drop in front, one end of it being inserted in the waist on the side, and the other left free. This portion of the saree is usually highly ornamented with golden thread, tinsel, etc.—the free end descends to the middle or lower part of the thighs, the other free end of the saree hanging down towards the legs is now got hold of, passed between the legs and fastened to the tie around the waist at the back, and the whole encircled by a gold or silver waist belt. By this mode of dress a fold of the muslin saree forms a loop round each leg, and descends nearly down to the ankles, whilst the gathering hangs in front between the legs free. At home they wear the choolee

and saree, with a petticoat or *pavaday*—this, in fact, is their usual dress, except when about performing they exchange the *pavaday* for the *pyjama* or *sheraï*—the *pavaday* is made of chintz or silk, according to the means of the individual. A string of small brass bells, known by the name of *shullungay* or *gedjum*, is tied around each leg immediately beneath the ankles. The dancing girl caste is so well-known all over South India, that they have peculiar laws of their own for adoption and inheritance—for instance, a dancing girl can adopt a daughter with the permission of the authorities of the pagoda to which she belongs, but she cannot adopt a son, for the transmission of property, it being immaterial whether she has a son or not. The adopted girl cannot share her mother's property during her lifetime, and, although she may be the heiress, she is not bound by the laws of caste to support her brother's widow. Among dancing girls property descends in the female line first, and then to males as in other castes. In the failure of issue, the property of a dancing girl goes to the pagoda to which she belongs—a simple recognition on the part of a dancing girl, of a child as her daughter, in the presence of one or more individuals, is sufficient to constitute her claim to adoption. Dancing girls are respected by the several castes or sects of Hindus, and are allowed to sit in the assembly of the most respectable men, such honour not being accorded to their own wives and daughters. As a rule, it is seldom that these women have children of their own, unless, perhaps, they had lived in continual concubinage with some single individual, consequently they are always anxious to adopt girls, not only to become their successors in the temple, but that they may inherit their property likewise, which is no easy matter to effect now-a-days. Formerly a large trade was carried on by kidnapping good-looking girls from large towns and remote villages, who were sold to these women. As soon as a girl attains maturity, her virginity, if not debauched by the pagoda brahmins, is sold to outsiders in proportion to the wealth of the party seeking the honour, if such it may be termed, after which she leads a continuous course of prostitution—prostituting her person at random, to all but outcasts, for any trifling sum.

The practice of kidnapping for prostitution is not uncommon, when the object is unattainable by the more palliative means, if I may venture to say so, of purchase or consideration. Foul means are resorted to as the only alternative—but this is now comparatively rare ; money or other consideration generally suffices. In the Indian penal code, the definition is comprehensive, whilst a special enactment embraces the offence of selling or letting minors for purposes of prostitution, an enactment which meets even such a case as that of the begum of — in her dotage. Strange, but “truth is stranger than fiction,” as instanced in the matter of this old virago’s carnal desires, cherishing an unholy weakness for lads under eighteen who are regularly hired for the purpose. The practice of selling minors (girls) still obtains largely under suppression. An instance recently came under my notice in the Chittoor district. On the morning of the 13th July last information reached the police that two little girls, the daughters of one Ramalingum Moodelly, and another living in the suburbs of the town of Wallajapettah, were found to be missing ; they were last seen playing together in the main street of the village (according to the statement of the complainants) the previous evening. Their friends, after a fruitless search all night in the town, returned home under the impression that they had strayed. From the inquiries of the police it was ascertained that a woman with two little girls, answering the description of the lost children, were observed crossing the river, apparently going to Arcot. The police, working by this clue, captured a woman with two little girls in the south side of the environs of Arcot—they seemed to be travelling from the place. The children were identified by the complainants before the police inspector. They looked like twin sisters, and, although well able to walk, etc., were, in fact, speechless *in toto* ; and the complainants alleged that they were philtered. The woman’s (*Cumma lum’s*) admissions and her antecedents stamp her unmistakeably as an infamous prostitute and a procuress. She is a native of Chittoor, and was evidently on a kidnapping excursion. Some jewels were found in the cloth around her, which were removed from the persons of the little girls. It

afterwards transpired that she had observed these children at play, and decoyed them away with sweetmeat, subsequently using some narcotic to effect her purpose of transporting them quietly, with a view of recruiting the dancing girl class at Chittoor. It is remarkable that the children followed her silently *en transit* to Arcot in the dark. This woman was convicted by the magistrate at Chittoor, and sentenced to five years' imprisonment. The recent famine in Ganjam, Orissa, and Bengal, has been taken advantage of, not only by abandoned characters, but also by immoral native princes, for the basest purposes. I observe in the *Friend of India* that during the last criminal session (1866) in Calcutta two women were sentenced to seven years' imprisonment each, for having purchased a girl under sixteen years of age, for one rupee ten annas for the purpose of prostitution, and I have no doubt but that advantage has been taken of the recent famine in various parts of Southern India, to send agents out to purchase girls to recruit the dancing girl and other prostituting classes. In some stations there are said to exist two kinds of dancing girls—the dancing prostitutes differing from the pagoda dancers. The latter are said to live in concubinage as a rule; they are a privileged class under the *Arjala Santanam*, or descent by the son-in-law, literally by the daughter's children, or in the female line, and the law of *Dhya* applies to them, *Dyha* or *Dhya Baga*, or division by favour.

“Merasi” (heritage or right to official emoluments) operates as an inducement. These women are recognised as “Dasrees” and “Dava Dasrees.” The *dasrees* or dancing prostitutes belong for the most part to itinerant bands, and are frequently made up of women of low caste, who keep brothels in the several large towns, but still practise their professional accomplishments, and prefer living in concubinage. The “Siva” temple of the *Soournamookie*\* (Kalastry), a zemindary in the North Arcot district, maintains a large establishment of what is termed *dava dasrees*, or pagoda dancers, forming a distinct community there (*Audapapalu*), who exclusively live in concu-

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\* The name of the adjacent river from which the temple takes its name.

binage. Their sons, who know no father, pass by the appellation of *Nagari kunraradas*, or sons of the country, and are slaves to the Zemindar. Of the daughters, after supplying the vacancies in the pagoda staff, the remainder are brought in the list of drudges of the palace. The dancing master or teacher receives from fifty to five hundred rupees, with other presents, for teaching a girl the usual dances. This generally forms a contract which is greatly dependent on the wealth and position of the parties. The dancing girls are invariably accompanied by the following individuals, when about to perform. There are generally two men, singers, who are termed "Nuthuvan" and "Padovren," who, while singing, also play the cymbals—these instruments are of two kinds and sizes. While the cymbal is played with the right hand, the left hand, open, is generally applied to the left ear, while they sing, bowing their bodies forward as well as from side to side, contorting their faces in like manner, and making grimaces. In singing they scream as loud as their voices and lungs will admit; one or more old women join in the song, and frequently clap their hands during the performance, and are generally dancing girls who have given up the profession from age or other causes.

The following are the musical instruments played as accompaniments to the performance:—

1.—*Drums*.—Of these there are two: a large oval-shaped one termed a *dowl*, and a smaller one of the same shape and make, called a *malem*, *moorathungum*, or *mathalum*. These are hollow wooden cylinders, stout or large in the centre, and narrowed at either extremity, and covered by parchment at both ends.

2.—A wind bag, somewhat like a bagpipe, called *thoothee* or *sanuoothee*. This comprises the entire skin of a sheep or goat, freed of hair, and having all its openings closed, excepting two pipes of reed, one of which is inserted in the neck, and the other at one of the extremities, one to blow with, and the other through which the air issues, producing a low moaning sound.

3.—Two pairs of cymbals, large and small, termed *peria*, and *chinna*, *thalum*.

- 4.—A piccolo, termed *poolankushul*.
- 5.—A small flageolet, called *mogoveni*.
- 6.—A large „ „ *peria malum mogoveni*.

In addition, they sometimes have a clarionet, violin, tambourin, and guitar. These are innovations of late introduction. The performance of the dancing girls is well known, almost throughout the world, under the designation of nautch or dance. In the performance of the two dances termed *avanerim* and *kencheenee nateum*, their movements are combined with great agility, ease, and gracefulness, and with their nimble steps, the turning and twisting of their hands, eyes, face, features, and trunk agree, whilst they beat time with their feet. The feet are generally used flat as they seldom dance on their toes—the movements and position combine something of the waltz and Spanish cachucha—they advance, retire, whirl around, drop down and rise again with ease and rapidity, whilst the several movements are kept in order with the twirling and twisting of the arms, features, trunk, etc. Some portions of the step resemble the hornpipe and jig, whilst they hop and dance from one leg to another, keeping time, now turning, now whirling, now capering, and now drooping, performing a coquettish pantomime with their antics, then affecting coyness, and dancing from the assembly, by suddenly turning away as if careless of their allurements, but returning to the attack with greater vigour and increased blandishments.

It is, indeed, surprising to witness their feats of strength and bodily powers of endurance, for, notwithstanding their frail make and delicate appearance, the amount of fatigue they endure, dancing as they do from nightfall to the early hours of the morning, is astonishing. Their dancing is perfection, and the bodily fatigue they must undergo, from the attitudes and positions they combine in their dances, must be great. In what is called the “Sterria Coothoo,” athletic feats are performed, resting their hands on the ground and flinging their feet in the air with great rapidity, and thus twirling round and round successively performing various somersaults; lying full length on the ground with their hands and feet resting, contorting, twirling, and twisting their bodies in various ways, or whilst



resting on the hands and legs, with their backs to the ground and their chest and abdomen turned upwards, drawing the hands and feet as close together as possible; whilst their bodies are thus arched, they, with their mouths, pick up rupees from the ground. In this arched position, beating time with their hands and feet, they work round and round in a circle. During their performance they join their attendants in the songs that are sung, and regulate the various movements of their bodies to the expressions given vent to in the song.

*Modiyedoocooroothoo*.—In this dance the word “*modi*” is a term used to designate a craft or enchantment practised by a conjuror, who places or hides money or other valuables in a certain place, and often in the presence of his opponent, with the view of testing his ability, and challenges him to remove it, which the opponent endeavours to do by playing on a pipe termed “*makedi*,” and if he is not equally skilled, he is struck to the ground in a mysterious manner, sick and ill, frequently bleeding from the nose and mouth profusely. The dance is in imitation of this by the girl playing on a “*makedi*,” dancing at the same time and throwing herself on the ground—the right leg is stretched out at full length, forming a perfect angle with her body on one side; on the other, the left leg doubled under the knee, is stretched out in like manner on the opposite side, producing a most singular appearance, and as if there were no joint in the hips.

*Colla auteum*, or stick dance. This is performed by a number of girls of the same age, size, and dress, numbering from twelve to twenty-four, or more, each having two sticks, one in each hand, about eighteen inches long, well-turned, and painted with circular stripes of yellow, green, and red. Either to the roof, or a cross piece of wood raised in support for the purpose, a stout skein of thread in different colours is suspended, and, having as many strands as there are girls, the free ends of the strands are tied to the ends of the painted sticks each hold; the dance began with the usual song and accompaniment of music, when each girl striking her sticks dances a kind of jig, and hops from place to place, exchanging places with each other. This is done with such order and regularity that the several strands



are plaited with the utmost regularity into a stout cord or tape of many colours, according to the design. At a sign from the conductor the same is undone, with equal order and regularity, the girls dancing and exchanging places with each other without a single mistake or false step, either in the plaiting or unplaiting of the strands of thread. The readiness, grace, and ease with which the several movements are effected are worthy of admiration. At some places on festive occasions, during the peregrinations of the deity around the town in procession, these girls continue to perform the stick dance on a platform, which is carried and precedes the deity. More frequently these and other dances are performed on foot in front and at some distance from the procession, which stands still at a certain distance to allow of it being properly carried out. Some of these girls are very good-looking, handsome, with open countenances, large sparkling eyes, regular features, and intelligent pleasing appearance. They are perfectly self-possessed in manner, verging on assurance, staring at one with their large intelligent-looking eyes, notwithstanding they possess a vast deal of courtesy and polish, tempered with languid grace and serene self-possession, whilst their manners are courteous, and their bearing unembarrassed, possessing all the teaching which experience of the worse side of human nature gives, and they know but one form of pleasure, vice, in which their lives are spent—frequently their lives are truly vicious, when their countenances assume a sodden, pale, and unwholesome aspect. The majority are educated, that is, if I may use the word educated in the native sense. Many possess some natural gifts, although their education is not only limited, but of the worst description, for improving either their mind, manners, or morals; as to conversational powers, they seldom possess any beyond the usual laugh and giggle, and monosyllabic replies given to common-place questions. Some of the Telugu girls are very handsome; they are of a light pale colour, somewhat yellowish in tinge, with a softness of face and feature, a gentleness of manner, with a peculiar grace and ease, which one would little expect to find among them. I have seen several of these girls in my professional capacity while they lived as

mistresses with European officers, and have been greatly surprised at their lady-like manner, modesty and gentleness, such beautiful small hands and little taper fingers, the ankles neatly turned, as to meet the admiration of the greatest *connoisseur*. This is not to be wondered at when we call to mind how frequently European officers became infatuated with these women in days gone by. Even now, an occasional instance may be met with where these girls are preferred to their own countrywomen. Who can account for taste? A medical officer, whilst travelling, was called in to see a case of difficult labour, and, not having his instruments with him, sent for some dancing girls. He selected one with the smallest hands, and after a little instruction got her to do what was necessary. Her hands were made to act the part of a pair of forceps. The idea was a happy one, for by it the doctor was enabled to relieve a poor suffering creature at the moment successfully, with comfort to herself and without injury to the child. They can generally read and write their own language pretty correctly; some two languages; one girl at Conjeveram wrote three: the third was English, in which she wrote her name in a fair round hand, and spoke the language with some fluency. Tamil and Telugu were the other two languages, which she wrote tolerably well. She was said to have received her education in a mission school at Madras; notwithstanding all this, she did not appear ashamed of the profession she had adopted. The girls learn either Tamil or Telugu; to this paper I annex specimens of their writing, containing one or more verses of some of their songs, and which they wrote for me on the spot with the greatest readiness. Their songs generally comprise praises in honour of their several idols, filled with repetitions and unmeaning expletives. These songs are often vulgar and lewd, and sung, not only before assemblies of men, but even the deities, with a view of exciting the lasciviousness of the men, but in justice to them it must be said that they time the quality of their songs to suit the place and audience before which they have to appear. More frequently these songs comprise impudent flattery, and praise of the principal individuals present, or of the convener of the dance. These dances are termed *nautches*,

and are given on all occasions of marriage ceremonies, feasts, and other public occasions. Among Rajahs, Zemindars, and others, they are almost things of daily occurrence. A few of these girls can play the native guitar or violin tolerably well, and some of their songs have a mournful and melancholy tune ; but the harsh grating of the songs of the attendants, and the rattling of the wind instruments and tom-toms, are too much for European ears, but they seem sufficiently sweet and entertaining to charm that of the native : for not long ago, it is said, a large party of native gentlemen assembled in a part of Madras to do honour to a dancing girl, and presented to her some valuable plate in token of their appreciation of her (vocal) musical accomplishments. When their services are demanded outside the temple, large sums of money have to be paid for them, the charge being increased according to the renown and position of the girl, as some few of them take a very high position in this matter, and will not give their services, however highly paid, to any one of small importance, unless a Rajah, or some such big person. Some travel to other districts, when their services are needed by petty Rajahs or zemindars, and they are contracted for as many days as they have to perform, in addition to being well paid. Should they please the master of ceremonies, they frequently receive valuable presents in money, shawls, gold bangles or rings, and which are bestowed on them during the performance. Every village of importance has a temple with a few of these women attached to it, and in some of the large towns, possessing temples of repute for sanctity, these are filled with them. Instead of looking on this profession as an evil, the natives generally consider it an acquisition ; it forms the chief magnet of Hindu society. The appearance of these women draws all eyes on them, to the utter distraction of everything else for the time being, whilst the poor deluded creatures themselves are under the impression that they have taken to a very honourable profession, by following which they are honouring their deities and are appreciated by them. Both bachelors and married men have intercourse with them promiscuously. A married man is in no way ashamed of such lustful proceedings, but rather thinks it an honourable act.

This conduct is even approved of by his wife and family, in consequence of its connection with their immoral and degraded religion. Wherever the Hindu religion predominates, there immorality and debauchery run riot. It is perhaps one of the worst institutions connected with Hinduism, from the recognition and support it receives from all classes of idol-worshipping devotees, the poor unfortunate women being the victims of such a system, recognised and patronised by their religion in every part of India where Hinduism predominates. These poor creatures are more sinned against than sinning themselves. They are taught to read and write their own and other language, with a view to be better able to master their lewd and immoral songs ; whilst their own wives, the mothers of their children, are deprived of learning of any kind, and are carefully shut out from society, not even allowed to appear in public before any assembly of men, and are allowed further to grow up in the greatest ignorance and superstition. This is carried to such an extent, that the few enlightened and really educated males forming heads of families are totally unable to cope with such superstition and bigotry on the part of their women, and the little light they themselves have imbibed is rapidly quenched in consequence. Superstition and bigotry run rampant in their families ; but it is to be hoped that a better future is in store for the daughters of Southern India. To some extent female education and enlightenment are now penetrating the masses ; and as the natives themselves are seeking it, they cannot but contrast the benefits they have derived from education, and the enlightenment and intelligence displayed by European ladies, and from which their own mothers, wives, and daughters have hitherto been secluded.

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